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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the experiences of Karim (a member of the Ismaili cultural community in Canada), enrolled in an urban grade two multi-lingual classroom comprised of Canadian-born children who are second generation immigrants and whose daily lives are conducted in a language other than English. A researcher participated in the children's daily literacy routines during the course of one school year. Classroom activities were structured to promote the kinds of meaningful interactions that enables these children to understand the language of their peers with contextual support for figuring out the meanings. Sharing or Personal Storytelling Time was a unique classroom experience which provides the ideal situation for students like Karim to participate socially. Karim was a natural storyteller--he seized the opportunity to move beyond dialogical classroom talk to relate to others, within earshot, animated accounts from his well of lived experiences. Karim's stories indicated that he is accommodating without assimilating into the classroom community, and that he may be experiencing an internal conflict or ambivalence. The unfamiliar patterns of Standard English pronunciation, spelling, and handwriting constrained Karim's enthusiastic writing efforts. Implications of Karim's story are: (1) too often, teachers focus heavily on how different these children are from their native-English speaking classmates; (2) authentic sustained talk such as storytelling should be sustained; (3) teachers need to be sensitive to the classroom community as a whole; and (4) these children need to be seen for what they are--children. (RS)

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Inviting Children's Life Stories into the Elementary Classroom: The Storied Life of a Second-Language Learner

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Conference,

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As a storyteller, I want to start with my roots--these lines are from The Way of the Storyteller, my grandmother's storybook, which was published in Boston in 1878. The introduction begins in this way:

> "I know who I am from the stories I have told-
> I know who I want to become by the stories I choose to tell."
> (Boston: G. Allen, 1878)

Inside the front cover my name is neatly printed, as owner, under my grandmother's, mother's, and older sisters ' names before me and above each of my daughters' names. The book awaits future generations who might follow. This message emphasizes for me the importance of telling stories. For most of my childhood and storytelling years, it was the enchanted tales of long ago and far away of kings and castles that captured my fancy. But like other women who began to embrace feminist issues, I discovered that there were no Prince Charmings. Robert Munsch's Paper Bag Princess was much closer to reality than Cinderella and any of her variants-Little Tattercoats, Yeh-Shen or Mufaro. So I became an advocate for not just literary stories, tales of long ago and far way, but the stories of life's small moments which surface in the daily business of living. I found that everyone is a storyteller. Our everyday lives are intertwined with the stories we weave and hear told, with the stories that we dream or imagine or with the stories we eventually would like to tell. Stories provides us with a means of recounting and reassessing for others the mishaps and wonders of our day-to-day lives. Threads are woven as memories, anecdotes, jokes, family stories, journeys, dreams, gossip and imaginations. These everyday impromptu stories or "small moments" that we relate, enables us to legitimatize our sense of self as we attempt to make meaning of our experiences and the beliefs and values of our culture.

Our multi-ethnic classrooms are a village of cultural stories and storymakers---all with stories waiting to be voiced. Unfortunately, many of these voices remain silent. In this presentation, I will tell something about my story, which has been a fascinating research journey and then unlock those silent voices by telling the story of Karim, a second language storymaker from the Canadian cultural mosaic with whom I had the pleasure of working over the past year. This storymaker I refer to is a member of a grade two multi-lingual classroom into which I entered "the landscape" (Greene, 1986) in order to understand, in some way, schooling from their perspective. I entered an urban elementary school last Fall as just **Linda**, "an extra-ordinary big girl". In this "big girl" role, I relinquished the power that distinguishes me as, **Linda** the professor-researcher, a knower or expert. Instead of relying on asking children a string of stylized question-answer-responses--the what, how and when and why questions, I chose to be more conversational in my interactions. Continually, I suggested that I was uninformed and made statements to the children or to the teacher such as, ***"I am not sure, I don't think I know, hmm...I am a bit confused,*** or ***can you show me how to do this***." In this mode, I found a classroom eager to teach me. In so sharing the power, I was able to revisit my own childhood and step inside this world for one last time. As I joined these storymakers, I participated in their daily literacy routines. Sitting with these children at tables and work areas, I joined their world--dialoguing, writing, reading aloud, collaborating, listening, observing, storymaking and interacting with patience and without imposing (Beekman, 1986) . Our time together has made me, a critical friend, understand anew how important and necessary it is for culturally and linguistically different children to tell their stories and break the pattern of silence.

I would like to point our that I was not with immigrant children. I was with Canadian-born children, second generation immigrants, whose daily lives are conducted in a language other than English and who continue to speak their mother tongue at home and in their own ethnic community. Many of these children were a part of an extended family

and were raised by grandparent-caregivers as their parents work double shifts in an effort to realize their economic dreams during the harsh recessionary times. Parents are absent from the home during "prime time hours", times when the children are not at school. Hence, these children arrived at school with language and cultural practices that were at variance with school life. Because of their minimal oral fluency they remained silent during their early days in school and showed patterns of a different socialization. In this particular classroom, these children had come to school not fluent in either their home language nor English, the language of school. Many felt estranged to Canadian ways and were marginalized from the mainstream. Spending their daily life within the neighborhood community of shopping, school and church, they rarely ventured beyond to new horizons . I call these children **SPECTATORS** for they are often at the edge of the classroom.

THE MULTI-LINGUAL CLASSROOM

One of the most pervasive and pernicious myths surrounding these second-generation immigrants is that they have a language deficit and that schools must assimilate them immediately into the dominant culture. In reality their "identity kits" (Gee, 1987), that is, their ways of using language, thinking, and acting may not be valued or welcomed in school. Although the literacy curriculum inordinately favors first-language speakers from middle and upper classes as compared to those who have to"learn" it consciously in school, current holistic pedagogy advocates building on the language and cultural experiences brought to school by <u>all</u> children. In this philosophical framework, teachers validate second-language learners' present knowledge and use it as a stepping stone for the development of more complex understandings by organizing the practices and contexts for authentic oral and written language. Children learn through meaningful social interaction with more capable peers and adults in what Vygotsky (1978) calls "learning in the zones of proximal development". In this way, children are immersed in a language that **adds** English, both oral and written, to the language which they bring to school, not attempting to substitute English for it. Recognizing that these students' first language is a powerful

tool for thinking, learning and expressing, it is valued as an opportunity for building upon what they already know without disrupting or threatening their learning processes. To accomplish this aim, classroom activities are structured to promote the kinds of meaningful interaction that enables these second-language learners to understand the language of their peers and teachers with contextual support for figuring out the meanings. Children interact with classmates in the course of working on mutually involving tasks that invite talk, discussion, questioning, and responding. In many of these open-ended activities second-language learners participate in their own ways, using their life experiences and symbolic resources for their ways of talking, singing, writing. Of equal importance are the other times when the second-language learners are engaged in group activities, where children can join together and a sense of a classroom community can be fostered.

It was from continued observation of these second-language learners engaged and immersed in these socially constructed literacy tasks, I came to perceive some of the ways that they are able to "absorb the language" of the classroom. Like predators alertly perched and ready to seize the optimum moment, these children sit watching, listening, and observing intently while their radar is tuned to capture what the moment might offer. At times, it almost seemed to me, that a recognition appears in their look as if the wheels might be clicking in their heads and they understood a word, a phrase or a sentence. On other occasions, I felt that their confusing looks could signal that they might be silently questioning themselves asking their inner voices *"What does this mean?"* Quietly they watch and listen to their loquacious English-speaking classmates; eventually, with time and patience their voices do become heard.

SMALL MOMENTS: THE THREADS OF OUR STORIED LIVES

But classroom talk alone is not enough to help children add a second language to their repertoire. What these learners need is an authentic structuring activity of sustained talk (Wells 1992) such as storytelling (storymaking) in which they can share

their individual experiences and interpretations. Often overlooked as being marginally trivial, Sharing or Personal Storytelling Time is a unique classroom experience which provides the ideal situation for the second-language learner to participate socially. It provides contextual support that helps the child to convey his or her meanings and to grasp those expressed by others. Above all, it provides a real reason to interact with classmates and to design, shape, creatively construct his or her own message, anecdote or story in his/her own way. Children's stories, if given voice and honored in the classroom community, can become powerful vehicles for thinking and learning.

When I consider the strength of these second-language storytellers and the stories they tell, it becomes a collage of vivid impressions. I recall many recollections are centered on seven-year old Karim, a second-language learner from the Ismaili cultural community. Within the social world of the classroom, I came to know him through his spontaneous conversational narratives. Karim was a natural storyteller in the sense that he seized the opportunity to move beyond dialogical classroom talk to relate to me and others, within earshot, animated accounts from his well of lived experiences. What distinguished Karim is that in many of these stories he gives voice to the speech of the people in his story--creating a conversational dialogue peopled by family characters who take on life and breath. Tannen, (1987) calls this conversation "constructed dialogue" and sees this linguistic pattern as a means of contributing to interpersonal involvement. She argues that the creation of drama from personal experiences is crucial for meaning to be effected; the listener can understand and appreciate the story and imagine a possible world to account for such events. One of these such stories describes Karim's lost tooth.

> A long time ago night, I was sleeping in my Ninja turtle bed and I lost my front tooth. This one right here (demonstrating).....It fell out and went under my bed. I moved my bed all by myself with no one's helping

me. I looked and looked under the underside but I couldn't find it (demonstrating). I said to my mother, *"I lost my losted tooth."* She said, *"I will help you find it".* She looked with me under the underside place but it was lost. And then one other night, my next tooth fell out. This one right here (pointing to a missing space) and I found it and I putted it under my pillow. I got two quarters and one dollar from the tooth fairy who is very nice to good children.

I putted the money in my piggy bank. I have almost $100.00 in my piggy bank. When I get to 100, I am going to put it in a bank. Then my mom is going to give me a bank card when I am 7.., umm. 8....no...no..when I am 9. I am going to go everywhere with my Dad. And if I want something and my Dad says *"Karim, it is too expensive"*, I will use my money because I don't want to waste my Dad's money cos it is not the right thing to do.

Over the next months, I continued to sit at Karim's table chatting as we worked. Often we swapped anecdotal stories about the daily happenings and the small moments of our existence. I know that it is often difficult to sort out subtleties of language use and that variation can be idiosyncratic as well as cultural. However, patterns began to emerge in Karim's stories as it soon became obvious, to me, that the tenor of his stories were embedded with rich cultural inferences about the social appropriateness of living in a minority culture. Frequently, he mentions in his stories practicing culturally appropriate ways to behave or what he labels as "right". The tensions of his cultural roots and values are amplified in the following story that illuminates the trials and tribulations from learning to be independent as chronicled in the episode of Combing Hair.

Linda, do you know that I can comb my hair all by myself without anyones helping me? I can remember how I do it. I take the comb and push all my hair to the side over this way until it looks very nice. Then I

look in the mirror and see myself and my nice hair. I move the mirror so I can see the back of my hair (demonstrating). And I go to my mother and ask her,*"does my hair look nice?"* She looks at my hair and says, *"Karim, your hair is not right. It is too flat"*. So my mother fluffs up my hair with her hands and goes and gets the hair spray. I squeeze my eyes really shut and I don't peek while my mother puts spray in my hair. Sometimes the spray gets on my face and sometimes it gets on my nose and tickles me. When I open my squeezed eyes, I look in the mirror at my nice hair. It looks right. After, we go to church for prayers. I have to have my hair right cause I am a Ismaili boy and my God wants my hair to be nice. And then we go to my house. I go to bed. When I wake up in the morning, my hair is flat. I have to comb my hair all over again before I come to school cause the hairs are a big mess.

Knowing that story potentially provides the ability to enter others' worlds; Combing Hair allows me to perceive Karim as a second-language learner not estranged from his ethnic community. He is accommodating without assimilating into the classroom community for he is not giving up his cultural beliefs and practices. Not only is he confidant about is own identity and heritage but he knows that the multi-lingual classroom in which he attends, views diversity of thought, language and worldview with acceptance and respect. Telling about his "small moments" validates Karim as a class member while at the same time it also prepares his classmates for the richness of living in an increasingly diverse global community.

Personal narratives (story) belong to the silent language that embraces our thinking. Second-language learners need a time where seminal experiences, which often occur outside the social world of schooling, move from silent contemplation into speech. Storytelling, the act of producing a story, is such a social activity always surfacing in the daily business of living. Barbara Hardy (cited in Rosen, 1986) describes story as a

"primary act of mind transferred from art to life." In this way, we as humans are a storytelling tribe. As story sharers, we release the language and emotions dwelling within our conscious:

> ...we dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order to really live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future (p 13).

Mikkelsen, (1990) explains storytelling as literature in this way:

> It is a circle We make literature, and the literature we make helps to make us, helps us to puzzle out the ambiguities, the complexities of life. In creating we explore--and discover; literature causes us to know (p. 563).

By listening to stories told and read, first and second-language learners alike think and learn through story. In so doing, they encounter both familiar and new language patterns, learn new words or new contexts for words familiar to their ears. But merely listening to stories is not enough to promote language growth. Children need to tell stories and practice the language they have heard. Whether telling an impromptu tale while gathered at the coat hook or swapping both personal and fictionalized tales in Sharing Time or in Storytelling, children can explore how language works, test or practice new words or structures, and obtain feedback about their use of language. This feedback gives the child a chance to expand and elaborate their interpretations. Since all of the learning takes place within meaningful contexts, children are using language purposefully. Sometimes the situation is imaginary, as in a literary retelling; at other times the situation is narrating the on-going events of living as when we "celebrate our small moments".

KARIM'S HALLOWEEN GAMES

Another story explaining the games played at the Hallowe'en party is complex. It illustrates Tannen's point, while raising another.

> Linda, did your know we had a Hallowe'en party and everybody at my table in my class carved pumpkins and made them into Jack-O-Lanterns? Before we carved the faces, my teacher made some good games. I like playing the games. We had to feel the pumpkin and tell the teacher what it was like. She wrote the words on the board. She said to me, *"Karim, what does your pumpkin feel like?"* So I put my hand on the pumpkin and I told her, *"It feels round."* My teacher said, *"that is a good word, Karim"* and she writed my word on the board. Then we played another game. We had to think in our head and write on our papers how many lines (vertical) on the pumpkin. I guessed 13 lines and I writed that number on my paper. The teacher put a mark on the pumpkin and then we count all the lines on the pumpkin. My pumpkin had 27 lines. I raised my hand and told my teacher, *"I am almost right. I am really close. Cause the right number, 27, has two numbers together and my guess, 13, has two numbers together too."* I was almost right. My teacher thinks I am smart. I told my Dad this. My Dad said,*"he is proud of my good work."*

A second point to be made about how Karim creates meaning from his experiences is the way he selects and gives order to his thoughts. In telling his story, he found a way of interpreting his own behavior that he might not have been able to do otherwise. This story resembles an explanatory narrative which, according to Polkinghorne (1988), organizes events into a unified story where the links between the events are developed and the significance is provided. Explanatory narrative differs from descriptive stories as it is reflective and conscious, as the teller seeks to make sense of the complexity of events that contribute to explaining the outcome. But what may be far more significant in Karim's story is what it reveals about its author, a member of the Ismaili community. For this story genre not only belongs to a particular mode of discourse; it is as Bruner (1986)

states "also a way of thinking." Karim's story projects a sense that there is strong pressure to maintain the honor of the family and to live up to his parental expectations of doing well at school. Not only did Karim reveal, through his constructed dialogue, how he follows the teacher's direction in describing the pumpkin, but he rationalizes why he did not have the right number of lines and makes an approximation to the. correct answer by reasoning the positioning of his numbers. Being almost right seems to be important to Karim who looks upon schooling as a place to uphold his father's values. In some ways, I feel, Karim may be experiencing an internal conflict or ambivalence brought about, partly, because his sense of social identity in the classroom community may lead him to feel that he might be abandoning or betraying the cultural tenets of his community. Reassuringly for Karim, he lets his listeners know that both the teacher and his father hold his school work in high esteem.

FROM STORYTELLING TO WRITERS WORKSHOP

While storytelling may be a natural voice for giving meaning to our experiences, the telling of personal stories may be thought to be pedestrian and is often abandoned in the primary years in favor of written stories which, congruent with some, is an exalted use of language. According to Tannen (1987), oral and written discourse are not dichotomous but complex, overlapping and intertwined. Thus, oral language should support writing not evaporate after writing begins. The comfort zone of the oral tale can be the path by which young writers reach the written one. In the rush to achieve written texts, those spontaneous stories that were once shared with others during Sharing Time or as classmates gathered informally are often hurried directly into print. Often in too many classrooms, beginning writers sit and ponder as they rummage through their memories searching for a writing topic. These "small moments" are selected and then are brainstormed, webbed, storyboarded, drafted, revised, edited, and published. By conferencing with peers, in pairs and in groups, writers think of elements bit by bit--strong

leads, dynamic characters, integral settings, or open endings-without the benefit of orally organizing and rehearsing their narrative thoughts through sustained talk.

Whether in speaking or writing, creating a text involves managing two distinct types of processes (Wells, 1986). First, there are the processes of ideating or composing which is planning, selecting and giving order to an unremitting flow of events and ideas. In some ways, these processes are alike whether in speaking or writing. The second type of process is concerned with the physical production of encoding the content according to spelling and handwriting conventions. Due to its physical nature and the complex relationship between sound and symbol correspondence, the encoding sometimes lags behind the composing process. This second process often makes writing problematic for second-language learners and that is clearly true for Karim.

KARIM: FACING THE HURDLES OF AUTHORSHIP

In my anecdotal field notes, I wrote in the early Fall: After drawing a picture of his father and his little brother in the top margin of his journal, Karim looks around at his classmates who are engaged in the composing of yet another journal entry. Tensely, he turns around to me and asks, *"how do you spell* **look**, *Linda?" "Listen to the word as I say it--**l-o-o-k**. What sound does it begin with, Karim?"* This was my guiding response. *"**L**"*, he said proudly rolling his tongue in his mouth. *"Now how goes that one in English?"* he says and he quickly checks the letter's accuracy on an alphabet chart. He proceeds to inquire further. *"What comes next?"* I repeat the word again slowly *"**l-o-o-k**"*. This time I exaggerate the middle letters. *"What sound can you hear, Karim?" "**A**"* was his best guess as he shouts out his answer and its sound reverberates throughout the classroom. He jots an **A** in his journal. *"Is it finished?"* He inquires while pointing to the two letters, **l** and **a**. *"Listen again, Karim. What sound do you hear at the end of look?"* I try to nudge him to complete the final sound of his invented spelling. *"**C**"*, he yells out. After checking its shape once again on the wall chart, he slowly returns to his chair and painstakingly makes a *"**C**"* on the page. Then he asks, as he points to the letters--**LAC**,

"Is it right, Linda ?" "It's a good guess, Karim. You are certainly learning your sounds," I tell him reassuringly. He asks anxiously, *"Is it right, Linda? My words have to be right. My father says to me, Karim, your letters must be right. You have to do good work in school."* On a separate sheet of scrap paper, I write the word **look** all the while talking about its phonological features and comparing them to his approximations. Karim copies the "right spelling" of **look** into his journal. After he finishes copying the word, Karim said, *"I know how to spell **look** now. I put it in my brain."*

For a beginning writer like Karim, the unfamiliar patterns of Standard English pronunciation, spelling and handwriting constrains his enthusiastic writing efforts. Sound symbol representations require so much effort and attention that little is spared for the task of composing or for attending to the craft of text production during writer's workshop. Since writing is such a relatively new mode of linguistic communication for Karim, the actual texts he produces may give a much less reliable indication of his composing ability. It seems that Karim is not a risk-taker, his major stumbling block. He shows a prevailing reluctance to accept invented spelling as a placeholder for meaning. This reluctance may be embedded in his cultural roots or it maybe his nature. The classroom teacher's sage advice, *"Spell it the best you can, we can always correct the spelling later"* always goes unheeded. The production of the following journal entry required little risk-taking as Karim requested the spelling of many of the words from helpful classmates at his work table who willingly assisted him over the troublesome spellings. Seeing Karim as a writer is not through the same lens as knowing him as a storyteller. From his storytelling, I see many worlds not just the mirrors of his culture. On the other hand, his writing is limited to a spoken monologue about school culture: Batman, Ninja Turtles, Superheroes and Videogames as in this journal entry.

My Dad is going to Mega movies to rent Batman Returns.

VALUING ORAL--WRITTEN STORIES

As I continued to sit across from Karim at the work table, I listened to his "talk-while-doing." I would often hear him voice an on-going metacognitive dialogue with himself as he tried to spell words or decide what to write next. Frequently, he would write a letter or an entire word than voice aloud a *"no"*, shake his head, or self-question: *"how goes that in English?"* then erase the letter and precede to begin anew. With persistent efforts his writing vocabulary began to increase, but despite the prevailing philosophy of the writing workshop approach (Calkins, 1986) writing for him is not a recursive process. Karim was not working to draft tentative ideas that later would be refined, revised, or edited. Writing was try, erase, try once again. He was struggling with the English orthography and trying to match ideas with letters. Karim wanted to do well in school for he was aware of their expectations. Fortunately, his sensitive teacher realizes that to match the proficiency of his native-English speaking peers, Karim will take time and support.

Wells (1986) agrees that often there are indeed discrepancies between oral and written language ability. He argues that "....when there is strength in either mode, there is evidence both of: a satisfactory command of language and an ability to use it to good effect" (p. 188). It should be recognized that oral and written language provides distinct but complementary resources for learning. For second-language learners, like Karim, who are slower in acquiring control of the written mode, oral language activities such as storytelling and Sharing Time must continue to be integral to literacy learning. By participating in these activities, children will have the maximum opportunity to develop and use some of the composing and thinking skills that are so essential for intellectual development. In Karim's multi-lingual classroom, each child is considered a unique individual and is encouraged to develop as such with sense of personal dignity and worth. It is a classroom that is structured in such a way that first and second-language children can find and develop their own unique voices, each in their own mode--be it oral or written.

IMPLICATIONS

One of the most important lesson that I draw from Karim's story is that too often when working with second-language children, we focus heavily on how different these children are from their native-English speaking classmates. Our perception of differences often limit both what we allow the second-language learner to show us and what we ultimately are able to learn about the children themselves. If we erroneously believe that they cannot express themselves appropriately using oral or written English, we may not offer opportunities for them to explore and express their ideas, interest, and preferences. Karim and others see themselves as contributing members of the classroom community adding oral and written English conventions to their existing repertoire, rather than trading old ways for new.

Secondly, I want to argue for the continuation of authentic sustained talk such as storytelling or Sharing Time throughout a literacy curriculum. Too often, the acceptance of the learner's primary mode of making meaning wanes when demands for conventions increase in writer's workshop. The speaking-writing dimension is a continuum not sequential. For many second-language children who are less facile in written language, storytelling can provide a possible path towards the goal of effective thinking and symbol manipulation. At some point the path divides, the preferred text becomes the path to success.

Third, I need to emphasize teachers' sensitivity to the classroom community as a whole. Children need countless opportunities to build common ground with others, to act as special contributors to classroom life, and to link their lives to others who may, at first glance, seem quite different from themselves. It is in this area, I believe, that suggests the enormous potential of multi-lingual classrooms, like Karim's, for contributing to the development of adults who may transform social inequities into new social possibilities (Greene, 1988).

Fourth, by immersing myself in the culture of these storytellers, I have gained immeasurable insights into the structures of a lifeworld distinctly different from that of the adult-view. There is a broader landscape waiting to be understood. Given the large numbers of culturally and linguistically different children in our schools and the length of time it takes for them to be fully proficient in their new language, every teacher needs to consider herself/himself as a second-language teacher, whether assigned to that role or not.

Finally, I have come full circle. The words from my grandmother's storybook are now mine--"I know who I want to become by the stories I choose to tell." By telling Karim's story, it becomes my story and ultimately, the children's story. As their advocate, I urge others to see and understand these children for what they are--children. Not disadvantaged children. Not children of color. But children. Children of today's classrooms who need time to celebrate their small moments.

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